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THE BOOK OF THE DANCE

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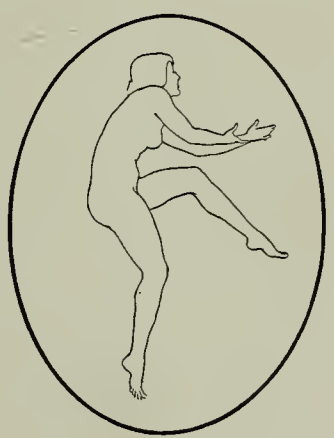
THE BOOK OF THE DANCE

ARNOLD GENTHE



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1920

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FOREWORD

When I decided to publish in book form the pictures of the dance which I had made during the last few years, my object was not to make a book of personalities. I merely wanted to show some of the phases of modern dance tendencies that could be recorded in a pictorially interesting manner. This, therefore, is meant to be just a picture book, permanently recording something of the fugitive charm of rhythmic motion, significant gesture and brilliant color which the dance has once more brought into our lives.

The pictures, arranged simply in groups, are even without titles. What they are intended to convey would not have been helped by labels.

That some of our most distinguished artists have had sufficient confidence in my camera to let me photograph them in their dances is something for which I am deeply grateful. For their patience and enthusiasm, without which these pictures could not have been made, I wish to thank them most heartily. And likewise do I wish to thank those lesser known and unknown artists—among whom, perchance, may be found the great dancer of the future—for having made it possible for me to obtain pictures expressing something of the grace and fluency of dance motion.

Modern ballroom dancing is not represented. That will have to wait until women can have dancing partners attired in other costumes than the straight, stiff, dismal black of the present day.

That it has been possible to include some of my color photographs will add to the interest of the book. I wish to thank Mr. Charles Beck, Jr., of the Beck Engraving Company, Phila-

delphia, for the care and skill with which he has solved the difficult task of transferring the color plates to paper.

The reproduction of the monochrome photographs and the printing of them was entrusted to the firm of Edward Stern & Company, Inc., Philadelphia. Even if a reproduction can never have all the qualities of the original, their attempt to preserve in each plate the spirit of the original print deserves great credit.

To all those who have helped to make the book what I had intended it to be, I herewith express my thanks.

ARNOLD GENTHE

THE BOOK OF THE DANCE

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ON WITH THE DANCE

SHAEMAS O SHEEL

Of all the temples of the arts, deep-buried in the sands of desert days, the deepest lost, the most forgotten, has been that of the dance. There is a peculiar significance in this, for dancing is the most elementary of the arts and most truly the heritage of all the children of men ; that it of all has been most nearly irrecoverable epitomizes the tragedy of the general turning-away from art. And it is characteristic of the conditions upon which the arts may return that this most democratic of them all has returned to us by way of a few devoted artists. We can re-create an ancient art in modern times not in ancient ways, but in modern ; that which under natural conditions was developed by all the people must under artificial conditions be restored by a few who shall be teachers.

The revival of the dance is significant of the abiding, though much forgotten, need of the world for its arts, and a proof of the strange immortality of the arts themselves. A few years ago several great dancers came to summon the world, who must have prepared through long periods separately and without a common plan; yet with the effectiveness of premeditated simultaneity they appeared, as it were in a company. And the response of a world still hungering, somewhat dimly, for the arts, was the welcome we give to an advent long desired.

Fortunate were those whose introduction to this momentous movement came by way of the greatest of its exponents, Isadora Duncan. It was one of the great hours, of which we have but three or four in a lifetime, when we first saw her. In that hour we sensed the manifold meanings and implications of the dance ; its ecstasies, inspirations, and healing beneficences,

and its possibly unimaginable importance to the modern world.

The dancing of Isadora Duncan is great symbolic art; now, when perhaps we have seen it for the last time, we must unhesitatingly re-affirm our conviction that it is one of the superlative artistic expressions of eternal spiritual glories. Her endowment is no mere talent for the consummation of exterior beauties; it is genius. She is a seer and a prophet, fulfilled of understanding and wisdom. The deep disease of the soul, its wasting, anemic illness since it ate of the weeds of prudery and went wandering on the hard roads of materialism, is known to her, and she has a great pity; and with devoted effort, through consecrating trials of toil and rejection, she has fitted herself to be a physician of the spirit. She brings us pure wine from an ancient vineyard, and she will not mingle with it any sharp strange bitters to sting our jaded taste. In her manner is nothing either of decadence nor of gigantic, splendid but agonizing dramaturgy. She is of the company of those who have held to the slender infragible thread of the eternal tradition of beauty. And coming so, she startles our spiritual memories from a sleep of centuries.

What glorious things she makes the soul remember! Once we were young, and the leaping blades of our desire striking the granite facts of life lit lively fires of wonder. We were simple, so that when the moving beauty of nature and the joy of each other's company stirred us to ecstasies, we sought free and natural expression; we danced—we danced as the movements of waves and branches, and as the exquisite beauties of our own bodies suggested. Such memories she evokes by her subtle gestures and movements, which are as the dancing of a leaf over the ground, as the drifting of mist over the still surface

of a lake at dawn. The morning of time dawns upon our spirits again, and once more we have a sense that hears the gods.

Watching her we see the soul of man moving in the dance of destiny; dreaming, hoping, aspiring, questioning; thrilling with desire and joy and melancholy, crushed, purged and raised again; the spirit of man enduring its trials and triumphing in the great adventure. This is the interpretation of life by the intuitive wisdom of genius, which is feeling confirmed by thought, and which understands that the ultimate of human apprehension is a mysticism impossible of interpretation save in symbolic art.

We may never see Isadora Duncan again, but we can never lose the memory of that splendid feminine body, voluptuous yet agile, graceful; that solitary figure in the impressive emptiness of the stage, before the stately hangings that reached up, up to a lost dimness of height, like the primeval forests, moving in the weird light, in the little space of grey radiance, exquisite, mysterious; barefooted, with draperies fluttering away from strenuous legs and perfect shoulders and arms "curving like a precious chaplet from finger to throat," swaying, running, drifting, the perfection of rhythmic motion, visible music! We can never lose the impress of her art on our spirits, for did she not invade the soul with terrible tumult, melt the heart in tears too deep for weeping, and hold us rapt while our emotions rose from unsounded depths to surge and flow? The true purgation of tragedy, the ecstatic creation of joy, this was her art, than which there has never been a greater.

But, lest the austerity of Isadora Duncan's appeal should leave some cold, the good angel of the dance has not lacked other incarnations of quite different kind. Thus the delicate art of Ruth St. Denis is frankly-avowed dramatic dancing, brief acts amid illustrative stage-settings and a supporting company. And in-

stead of the tradition lengthening down from Hellas, she has entered into the spirit of the Orient. With fine intelligence and exquisite art, she interprets ways of thought and feeling which, by their vast superficial difference from our own, stir our imagination into a discovery of fundamental unity; the drama of mood and passion and destiny everywhere the same. We draw near to the strange, sensuous, sacrificial East—the East where sacrifice is garlanded and veiled in sensuousness. In the austerity of the Yogi's attainment there is known the secret presence of sensuous beauty, as though it would not be denied a part in any service of truth; and the gross atmosphere of the Nautch revels betrays a feverish, futile effort to escape, in the obvious and carnal, the inevitable presence of sacrifice in the innermost soul of each reveller. This is Ruth St. Denis' distinctive contribution to the art of the dance—this and much interpretative intelligence and grace and beauty of motion. With what startling reality she invests the ancient mystery of Egypt; and with what singular power she has penetrated deeper than the carefully designed surfaces of Japanese life, catching the human emotion and eternal drama beneath! Her art, growing in power and beauty, is one of the compelling influences in the modern dance.

Even farther reaching, of deeper significance and of wider appeal has been the influence of the Russian ballet. The technique of the old-time ballet, as it persisted, little changing, for centuries, was an artificial, in a sense a deformed and unhealthy technique. Originally the ballet dancer was a light entertainer only, catering to our indolent, post-prandial moods. But the Russian ballet has created and developed a greatly intensified art, capable of bewildering and charming variety. It has learned to use the honest flat foot as well as the mincing toe, and to

develop dramatic emotion by direct methods of infinitely greater power than its erstwhile stilted conventions. Perhaps most important of all, it has been the means of flooding our drab world with the thrilling colors of Leon Bakst's barbaric imagination. The supple Mordkin, the flashing Nijinsky, the adorable Karsavina, have given life to strange emotions of our time; to our revolt against the drab and dull, to our passionate quest of the colorful and joyful, to our curiosity about the exotic, to the unrest and vague dread that possess us as we turn from the safe and stupid road we have been traveling, uncertain yet where runs the path we seek. But at least we have turned, we are seeking, and the Russian ballet, though it hardly ever touches the spiritual depths or whispers to the soul, does fling out the colorful banners of emotional and æsthetic liberation, which we gladly follow.

And of all the dancers who have come to us from Russia, most gladly do we follow her who has gone farthest and has most surely captivated our hearts, Anna Pavlowa—the incomparable, the exquisite! What delicate beauty and simple grace, in a ballet like Coppelia; what thrilling dramatic intensity, rising to the symbolic, in the Bachanal! That was a dance of dances—glorious madness of wine in the veins of youth, delirious and perilous passion, floods of wildness liberating vigorous limbs, inspired command of impetuous and languorous steps, head-tossings and arm-wavings, one long, sweet, wild, ecstatic celebration of the joy of life! And Pavlowa, being an artist of keenest intelligence and highest sincerity and courage, has developed her art in suppleness and significance, out of artifice, into freedom, grace and power.

What the future of this art of the dance will be is by no means clear. For all who have seen Isadora Duncan and the

exquisite company of young girls inspired and moulded by her, life and its purposes and possibilities are charged with greater meaning. The color, the spirit of the Russian Ballet, stimulated to a freer and more powerful achievement, has entered into our modern life. Schools of æsthetic dancing have multiplied and do not lack patrons. Art, however, is at home only in two places—the mind of the great artist or the communal mind of a social organism which is socially and communally conscious. Much of the æsthetic dancing taught in schools and patronized by the artistically ambitious is of a quality to astonish Terpsichore, for here the fatuous and the foolish will rush in where angels fear to tread. Folk-dancing, too, is often taught our children by such singularly unimaginative females that the youthful sense of humor is touched rather than the youthful imagination. Nevertheless we may expect encouraging results from the efforts of the æsthetic schools, while folk-dances, being in essence spontaneously conventionalized modes for the rhythmic expression of simple emotions, must have their far-reaching effect too. Indeed even the present-day ballroom dances partake of the new spirit. There is a thrill of rhythm and a touch of grace in them; they are real dances, capable perhaps of far-reaching development.

But for the dance as a great art, what is the prospect? Is it to stay with us, like music? Is it, like the opera, the concert and the recital, to be one of the justifications of our greater cities in "the season?" Has this art truly been restored to us? It is still battling for its place. Do we want it—enough of us to give it a living? No answer that the world will give to any question of the arts in the coming decades will be more important than the answer to this.

For through the dance, if at all, rhythm will return to life.

Under the spell of one of the great dancers, who has not felt a tumult of longing to dance—to run and leap and toss the arms for joy, to confess our melancholy in slow and swaying rhythms? It is a human function—a vital need—a primal desire invincibly inhering in the fibre of each stolid and conventional one of us. We had securely hidden the secret beneath our conventional behaviors; but now we yearn for a new and liberated order in which we may indeed dance. Then we go out into the complexity and ugliness of the life that rushes by in our streets; we become aware of our clothes, which bind and weigh us down, and could not flutter in the breeze nor take a beautiful life from swaying limbs and running feet; we remember the tragic disunion of the social order, the absence of communal spirit.

But the dance, the opener of the doors of rhythm, has come to our door on eager feet. She bids us awake to her master spell. She whispers to us the secret we lost in the Golden Age, that life can attain happiness only through rhythm. A community that could dance together could not be divided by injustice and hatred. She speaks, to be sure, in terms not of years, but of centuries. It were better for us, at least, not to scoff. The future no man readeth; but, in gratitude to those great artists who have come to us with this chalice, let us cry On With the Dance!

Pictorial art, which has the privilege and duty of ministering to the other arts, has done but ill heretofore in behalf of the dance. There have been many delicate sketches made and some really fine photographs, but these have not been widely available, and the best books on the dance have been calamitously illustrated. Now at last this deficiency on the pictorial side has been supplied. The latest of the arts, photography, has

been used by one of its greatest masters to give the world a definite, coherent, illuminating record of the modern art of the dance.

Arnold Genthe, who during many years has used the camera with signal success for making pictures of what his vision and imagination perceived in the realities before him, was indeed the ideal man to record the features of the dance in this day. To vast resources of knowledge and superior intellect, Dr. Genthe adds that keen sensitiveness and unquenchable enthusiasm which enable him to approach and pursue his problem with rare subtlety and devotion. He has given us a great and beautiful book.

Here is motion made immortal. The common pictorial error of arrested motion—motion cut into bits, petrified, mocked and denied—that you will not find here; but motion as it flows and is, as it creates and is created. Here are magic designs suddenly made by the human body—ephemerae were it not for this record, rare impressions of ecstasy conveyed in vague, ethereal outlines of body and drapery. Here is the poignancy and majesty of the first of all arts—significant gesture—gesture charged with what speechless emotion—here mirrored, not imitated; here not dead, but living. And the beauty of the human body, the divine human instrument of this art, is revealed with ineffable tenderness.

It is a trite phrase among us that there is nothing more beautiful than this our body; a trite phrase, but how deeply do we believe it, how much do we care, how do we honor it? The twin vices, Fashion and Prudery—feigned enemies, at which the Devil laughs—have eliminated the human body as a thing of beauty in human life. Of old they cast out devils on the rack; but we cast out beauty with the scourge of self-

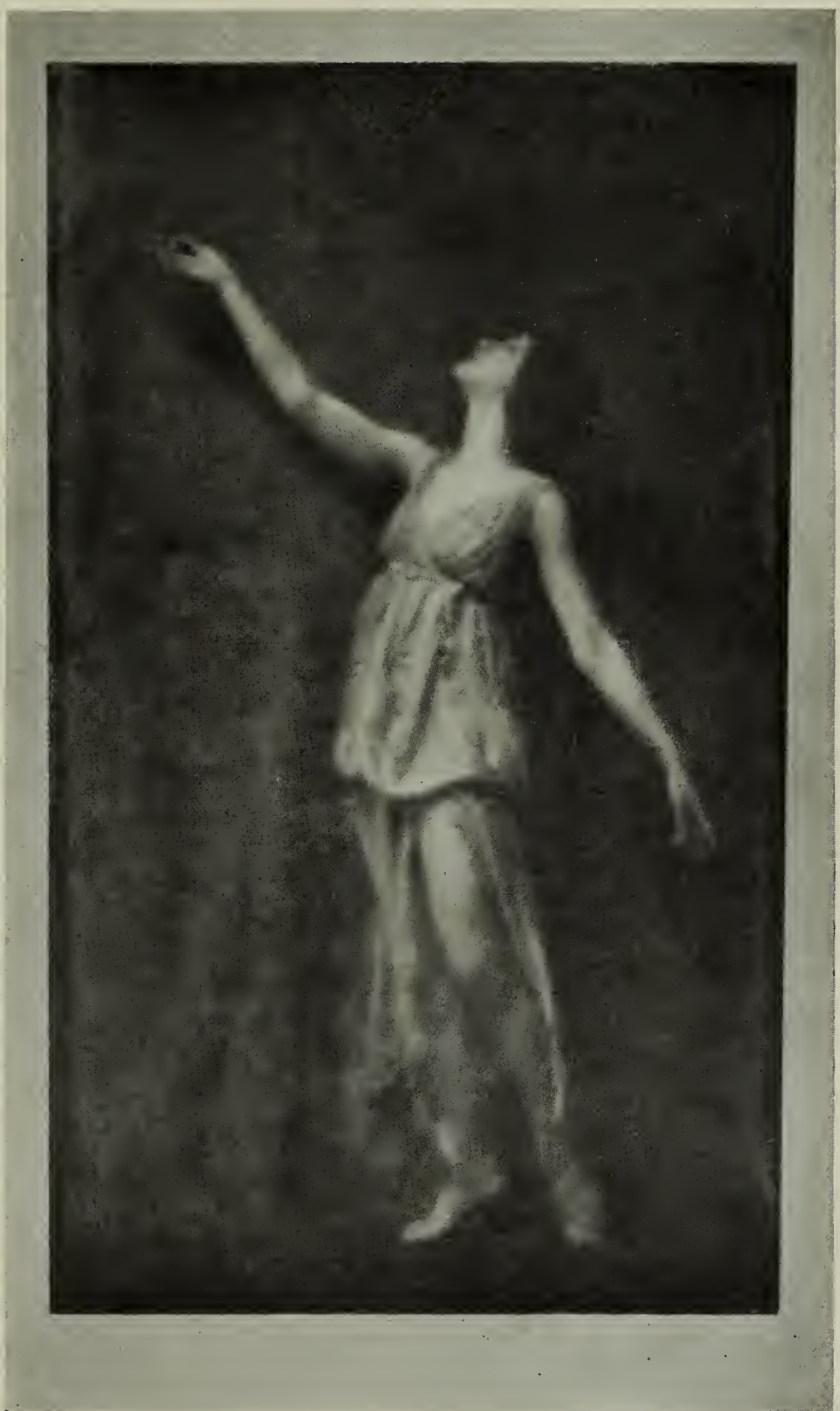
righteousness. We have pretended to set our minds on so high a plane that they are unaware of the body, and to enter the realm of exalted thought we insist on making ourselves ghosts.

We do not consider with solicitude how the body may be made a part of our arts and a constant inspiration to our days; and perhaps the Creator of its flaming beauties, the Moulder of its thrilling lines, the Fashioner of its supple limbs, the First Lover of its warmth and passion, has grown tired of weeping at our folly. Or perhaps He bideth a better time. The spirit of beauty is imperative and eager; once she is ready to grant a new vision of herself, she will not cease knocking at our unwilling doors.

Meanwhile we have the dance vital again among us; we have these pictures of Arnold Genthe's, these pictures even of the body itself, not as a pale symbol or a cold study, but as a living instrument of art, made to dance and be seen and pictured dancing. And we have the hope, nay the promise of a future which, because of the devotion and genius of such dancers and such picture-makers, will be very different from the future that prudery and materialism dream.

I

ISADORA DUNCAN SCHOOL



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